

FOREWORD

No single geographical framework adequately encompasses the past. Over the past two centuries, the history of a single nation, and libraries and bookstores usually group history books by nation. Moreover, most secondary students throughout the world are obliged to study the history of their nation. All governments presume that the common grounding of a suitable history curriculum will provide more sufficient national consciousness to ensure that young people become good citizens—or at least acquiescent taxpayers. The nation-state thus shapes our lives and has been a central force in modern history.

But the nation is not the only context for conceptualizing the past. Mountain ranges and inhospitable deserts have separated people far more effectively than political boundaries; on the other hand, some cultural forms, such as religions, languages, and popular culture, flow from one nation to another with astonishing ease. Though nations have attempted to control immigration, people often ignore national restrictions and irrepressibly seek opportunities wherever they can. Human activity and culture is not effectively bounded by the nation-state.

This atlas therefore undertakes a consideration of the entire continent of North America. One justification for this approach is that the main geographical features of the continent do not correspond to its national subdivisions, which mostly stretch east-west from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. The Rocky Mountains cleave the continent along a north-south axis, defining a Pacific coastal rim that stretches from Alaska to the isthmus at Panama, leaving a vast plain in the center of the continent, drained by the Mississippi River and its tributaries; to the east lies the Atlantic coastal plain. Human settlement has often followed these natural paths. The earliest inhabitants, peoples from Siberia or northern China, crossed the land bridge at what is now the Bering Strait and trekked southward along either side of the Rockies; many thousands of years later, Spanish settlers and colonizers worked their way up the Pacific rim from Panama and Mexico to California; French colonists ranged along the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes and then paddled southward along the Mississippi to its mouth; English colonists, meanwhile, established footholds along the Atlantic coastal plain.

This historical atlas shows how war, political settlements, and economic and demographic forces eventually imposed national boundaries greatly at odds with the geography and historical precedents of the continent; the atlas also depicts the emergence of the United States as the dominant power on the continent.

The emergence in recent years of a global economy suggests, however, that even a regional orientation is insufficiently broad. Readers of this atlas may wish to consult the other volumes in this series to compare the developments in North America with those elsewhere in the world.

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for the authors

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Foreword by Mark C. Carnes

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